

Heroism: A Sirius Subject

When analyzing the Harry Potter books many commonly isolate Harry as the hero of every novel. While this is true for the series as a whole, there are other characters that can also be seen as heroes. A primary example of such a character is Sirius Black, who only appears within the third, fourth, and fifth books of the series. By examining his character while using the Aristotelian model of the tragic hero, it becomes apparent that Sirius is one such hero. In order to create this analysis, the focus will rest primarily upon *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the third book, and through minor references to *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth book.

To begin it is necessary to reveal the basic similarities that can be drawn between the character of Sirius Black and the traditional tragic hero. The most basic points that are met are that a tragic hero is traditionally male, a leader or in a position of power, and is fundamentally good. The gender of Sirius Black requires no further analysis, but the other points do require minor specification. Both the position of power and fundamental goodness of the character are answered through Black's involvement in The Order of the Phoenix both before and after the birth of Harry. The members of this group are charged with fighting against Lord Voldemort, and in order to do this they must have at least a minor amount of decency within their character.

All tragic heroes must make some sort of decision that leads to their ultimate downfall through some flaw within their character. The serious decision that Sirius makes ultimately sets the entire Harry Potter series in motion. When it is learned that the Potters are under direct threat from Lord Voldemort, magic is done in order to protect them. The primary defense established is known as the Fidelius Charm. This spell entrusts the location of something to one person who is the only person who can reveal said location. By making this person or Secret Keeper solely responsible, those in hiding cannot be found unless the information is divulged directly by the Secret Keeper. The wizarding community has assumed that due to the close bond that Sirius Black shared with the Potters that he was their Secret Keeper. Based upon this assumption, he is blamed for their untimely death at the hands of the Dark Lord. We learn, though, that Sirius did not take the responsibility, but rather gave it to another friend of the Potters. This crucial decision is what allows Voldemort to find and kill both James and Lily. Sirius believes that Voldemort will assume

like everyone else that he is the Potter's Secret Keeper. He believes that if he gives the position to Peter Pettigrew he will be able to outwit the Dark Lord.

This decision reveals Sirius' tragic flaw or *hamartia* which is crucial to a tragic hero. Black's flaw is rather more complex than merely the traditional idea of pride. While pride does play a part in his decisions, which is evident in his belief that he can outsmart the most powerful dark wizard, his unwavering loyalty to his friends also causes his crucial error. He is willing to act as a red herring in the hiding of the Potters to the point that he is even willing to accept death if it means that his friends will be protected. This decision directly mimics the actions of Oedipus from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In order to protect himself and his parents from the hand of fate, Oedipus flees, believing that if he stays he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. Sirius, as previously mentioned, believes that his choice will also protect those he loves, but like Oedipus his choice inevitably brings about that which he attempted to keep from happening. While this is further proof of his pride related flaws, his choice to give the position to Pettigrew exemplifies the aspect of his *hamartia* in relationship to loyalty. Black believes that all people are just as loyal to their friends as he is. His attempt to thwart the Dark Lord through the use of Pettigrew only occurs because he believes that because Pettigrew is the Potters' friend as well, he will be just as determined to keep them from harm. He does not doubt the reliability of Pettigrew, even though he later comes to realize that the signs were always there that his rat-like friend could not be trusted. This idea of loyalty has in essence made his actions doomed for failure even before they truly took place.

Peter Pettigrew is also the character that leads Sirius to learn that it was his fated actions that led to the death of his friends and is also what causes him to experience his first moment of necessary suffering. When Sirius explains what has previously happened, we learn that he feels responsible for what has happened to James and Lily, which is a main point of the Aristotelian hero. This can be seen in an excerpt from the scene in the Shrieking Shack:

“Harry...I as good as killed them,” he croaked. “I persuaded Lily and James to switch change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me...I’m to blame, I know it...The night they died, I’d arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he’d gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It’d didn’t feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents’ house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies...I realized what Peter must have done...what I’d done...”(Prisoner 365)

In this passage it becomes apparent that, while Sirius did not give up the location of his closest friends himself, he feels that he is ultimately responsible because he chose to give the

responsibility to Peter Pettigrew. He feels that their death is his fault, but he does not see that it has come about through his own flaws. He merely feels that he has made a bad decision in trusting Peter. Black also gains further understanding when he and Pettigrew meet face to face. The day after the Potters' deaths, the two meet, and Pettigrew yells that Sirius is the reason that Lily and James are dead and he then blows up the street, killing multiple muggles, giving him the ability to scurry away. At this moment Sirius begins laughing hysterically, an action that the men from the Ministry of Magic see as a sign of his guilt. This, though, is the point at which Sirius understands that he has been set up by the man he once thought to be his friend. His laughter is merely an audible sign of his acceptance that he is doomed to go to Azkaban. The faking of Pettigrew's death has made it impossible for Sirius to prove that he did not kill the Potters. No one except Lily, James, and Sirius knew that Sirius was not the Secret-Keeper. He does though learn from his mistake. Sirius becomes the only wizard who knows that Pettigrew is still alive and must be kept from bringing further information to The Dark Lord. While he is imprisoned in Azkaban he sees a newspaper article with the image of a young boy and his pet rat. From this moment onward it becomes his mission to find the rat, Peter Pettigrew, and keep him from hurting the only Potter left. He explains this fully in the following passage: "...I saw Peter in that picture...I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry...perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again...ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of his allies...and to deliver the last Potter to them" (Prisoner 371). This knowledge also keeps him sane while he is locked away. While he is there he begins to establish a plan from getting inside Hogwarts to protect his best friend's son. Though it has been mentioned, the imprisonment of Sirius in Azkaban has not been entirely described. It does, though, fit into the formula for the tragic hero. He must experience some form of spiritual or physical pain, and the wizarding prison of Azkaban inflicts both of these upon its prisoners. Within the following excerpt, Sirius' punishment can be fully understood:

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't suck it out of me...but it kept me sane and knowing who I am...helped me keep my powers...so when it all became...too much...I could transform...Dementors can't see, you know...they feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions...but I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand" (Prisoner 371).

The suffering that Sirius has to go through within this book has prepared him to kill a man he once thought was his friend, in order to protect the only person left to connect him with his friends who were betrayed. Though much of the heroic model has been dealt with within

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Sirius has not yet completely fulfilled the tragic hero model. This culmination occurs within the fifth book of the series, in which he meets his end.

Within *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Sirius returns as a more dominant character, following a rather minor appearance within the fourth book of the series. He has continued to suffer during his absence, though his current suffering is on a more spiritual level. Sirius has been forced to live in his family home upon the orders of Albus Dumbledore in an attempt to protect him. This action, though, can be seen as tantamount to returning Sirius to Azkaban. He has no pleasant memories of his family, and, by surrounding him with physical and emotional reminders of his childhood, Dumbledore has unintentionally subjected Sirius to further spiritual pain that he cannot hope to evade by changing into his secondary form. During this time Sirius' personality, which has previously been described as reckless, becomes even more so. As with many of the other Harry Potter novels, *The Order of the Phoenix* contains a large final battle between the forces of good and evil. This moment in the novel is the point at which Sirius is able to fulfill the seemingly most crucial part of the tragic hero formula. Following all of his suffering, he inevitably meets his tragic demise after he has made one last reckless decision in which he has been guided by his hamartia. When Sirius learns that Harry may be in danger at the Ministry of Magic, even though he has been told to remain at Grimmauld Place, Sirius insists that he needs to be at the battle. Upon his arrival at the Ministry, Sirius immediately joins the fray, attacking the Death Eater whom Harry was previously dueling. This shows his want to protect Harry from harm, which is what he could not do for his godson's parents, which exemplifies his flaws in relation to loyalty. In a matter of moments, Sirius reveals his flaw in relationship to pride. He insists Harry leave the battle and allow him to duel with a specific high level Death Eater, his cousin Bellatrix Lestrange. This attack is not merely a physical attack, but also an emotional one. He is attempting to take on the only physical representation of his Pureblood family and that which has been spiritually damaging him since his forced return to Grimmauld Place. During this attack, though, he allows himself to fall victim to his own pride, which can be seen in the following passage, "Harry saw Sirius duck Bellatrix's jet of red light: He was laughing at her. "Come on, you can do better than that!" he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room" (Order 805). This final moment of reckless behavior fueled by pride is what directly precedes Sirius' death. His death, though, is not without purpose, which is one of the few points left that must be fulfilled in order for Sirius to be characterized completely as a tragic hero. Harry is immediately filled with grief following the death of his godfather, and this is what keeps him from being possessed by Lord Voldemort, an event that may have ultimately led to his premature death before he could complete his own journey. Sirius' death is also what forces

Dumbledore to tell Harry all of the information that he has been keeping from him in an attempt to protect him. This knowledge further reveals to Harry what he must do, causing him to become more confident, thus removing fear from the main character.

Through his three novel story arc, Sirius Black is able to personify the Aristotelian formula for a tragic hero. For each moment of happiness that occurs for him, it seems as though he is met with a moment of severe disappointment. This allows the reader to continuously feel a sense of pity in relationship to this wizard, whose life has seemingly never been one of ease. We see him make poor decisions, which he bases primarily upon his feelings of pride and loyalty, which allows him to act recklessly. As any tragic hero must do, he is faced the consequences of his *hamartia* and eventually dies in a way which benefits other characters. By looking at his death using this model, the decision to destroy the final physical connection Harry has to his parents through his godfather can be seen as a necessary evil, as opposed to a mere destruction of a mildly interesting wizard.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. New York: Scholastic, 2003. Print